

Track and Trace
by Zachariah Wells
Review by:
Micheline Maylor



Biblioasis Press
\$17.95

This little book is a hybrid of a quality chapbook folio and a trade poetry book. It is an artifact, an object easily displayed as a treasure, a collector's gem. The snow white cover is imprinted with footsteps circling the subtle silver title. But wait, it's more than that. It's Canadian without screaming CANADIAN POETRY. Wait. Open the pages: formalism, contemporary voice. Everything poetry should be: reflective and linguistically aware, imagistic, connected to human emotion and experience (Sorry Bök). But, wait, I forgot, delightful.

Zach Wells earned my respect back in 2006 when *Unsettled* was released. It's formalism and imagery was solid. He improved through editing *Jailbreaks: 99 Canadian Sonnets*; my copy is now thumbed through to the point of disrepair and is a recommended must have for fans of Canadian poetry. Wells is one to watch and to quote Fraser Sutherland from *Quill and Quire*, "Wells is a Maritime poet of direct speech and muscular lexicon." Indeed, this is evident in *Track and Trace*.

Wells begins with an invitation, in "What He Found Growing in the Woods"(13). A "look what I have curled in the palm of my hand sort of invitation", as if the cover, reminiscent of a Canadian snowstorm, weren't enough to compel a reader to pick up the book and have a tactile experience.

I stopped in my tracks (pun intended) reading "Cormorant". Here Wells shows why he is earning his reputation as one of

Canada's best poets. In painstaking rhythmic quatrains that slow the narrative to single frames, he narrates an inept boy, a shotgun, and a not-long-for-the-world hungry bird. The deftness is in the crafting of the line. The layering of sounds creates an in-the-round sort of linguistic dance, where the moment can't be escaped from until the last grim moment when the subtlety in the narration parallels the boy and a long-dead, stinking gluttonous Heron. Each word contributes to the effect in such a way that craft cannot be doubted.

And what is this, a villanelle, of sorts, in "Fool's Errand" (24)? Yes. Nineteen lines with the structure tinkered with, but not so unrecognizable as to escape notice. This ironic little piece concerning dogs in heat, in the worst blizzard of the year, sends me back to the plodding footsteps pressed into the cover. "Bring them in, she said, they'll freeze to death / out there. Out there then I went, / tripping through the hip-high snow" (24). This poem has all the underpinnings of old world craft I find lacking in tired free verse and avant garde. This is where Wells excels. This is where our poetry, Canadian Poetry, reaches world standard.

Rare are Wells missteps. Though the title "He Finds An Acceptable Way to Grieve" is almost unforgivable when attached to this particular poem, the title is too self important, the title throws away the stifled emotion of losing a best friend too soon. Yet, the poem recuperates and unveils the profound emotions of the narrator.

In the midst of all the chaos and clatter
the cones were all that mattered
to me; lay them out in neat rows
on their racks, make verse of prose
fact, stack them in piles six high,
stow them in the cupboard to cool off and dry,
then start again – I made at least a thousand cones,
while my mother covered Mutt with a cairn of red stones. (29)

TOC be damned, where all these titles sit together as a collection.
This poem deserves a better title. Quibbles. Just minor quibbles.

Micheline Maylor

Wells convinces me to forget these trifles by the time I reach the poem “Mussel Mud”.

The sudden stink of mussel mud drifting
through the warehouse doors, blown off the bay
on the south shore of this northern island, lifted
me up and led me like Ariadne’s thread
through a synaptic matrix of daedels
till I landed, a boy, on the north shore
of a southern island, the fertile pong
in my nostrils, breeze tangling my hair,
seabirds shrieking their raucous diphthongs-
then, from the cloudless sky, a man spoke
and I woke from my dream and I was here,
in a warehouse choked with diesel smoke,
the familiar reek gone from the air. (36)

Look at line five! Sigh. Poetic arrest. I weep with joy and jealousy.

Buy this book. It is an art piece, a curiosa, a treasure. And that’s all I have to say about that.

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